SOCiETY, CULTURE, AND REFORM, 1820-1860

Many of the significant reform movements in American history began during the Jacksonian era and in the following decades. The period before the Civil War is also known as the antebellum period. During this time, a diverse mix of reformers dedicated themselves to such causes as establishing free (tax-supported) public schools, improving the treatment of the mentally ill, controlling or abolishing the sale of liquors and beers, winning equal legal and political rights for women, and abolishing slavery. The enthusiasm for reform had many historic sources: the Puritan sense of mission, the Enlightenment belief in human goodness, the politics of Jacksonian democracy, and changing relationships among men and women and among social classes and ethnic groups. Perhaps most important of all were the powerful religious motives behind the reformers' zeal.

RELIGION: THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING

Religious revivals swept through the United States during the early decades of the 19th century. They were partly a reaction against the rationalism (belief in human reason) that had been the fashion during the Enlightenment and the American Revolution. The Second Great Awakening began among educated people such as Reverend Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College in Connecticut. Dwight's campus revivals motivated a generation of young men to become preachers. However, in revivals of the early 1800s, successful preachers were audience-centered and easily understood by the uneducated as they offered the opportunity for salvation to all. These populist movements seemed attuned to the democracy of American society. The Second Great Awakening, like the first, caused new divisions in society between the newer, evangelical sects and the older Protestant churches. It affected all sections of the country. But it was only in the northern states from Massachusetts westward to Ohio that the Great Awakening played a significant role in social reform. Activist religious groups provided both the leadership and the well-organized voluntary societies that drove the reform movements of the antebellum era.

1. Revivalism in New York:
In 1823, a Presbyterian minister named Charles Finney started a series of revivals in New York, where many New Englanders had settled. Finney appealed to people's emotions & fear of damnation and persuaded thousands to publicly declare their revived faith. Because of Finney's influence, western New York became known as the "burned-over district" for its frequent "hell-and-brimstone" revivals.

2. Baptists and Methodists:
In the South and on the western frontier, Baptist & Methodist circuit preachers, such as Peter Cartwright, would travel from one location to another & attract thousands to hear their dramatic preaching at outdoor revival, or camp meetings. They converted man of the un-churched into respectable members of the community. By 1850, the Baptists and the Methodists had become the largest Protestant denominations in the country.

3. Millennialism:
Much of the religious enthusiasm of the time was based on the belief that the world was about to end with the second coming of Christ. The preacher William Miller gained thousands of followers by predicting a date (Oct.21, 1844) when the second coming would occur. When nothing happened the Millerites continued as a new religion, the Seventh-Day Adventists.

4. Mormons:
Another religious group, the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, or Mormons, was founded by Joseph Smith in 1830. Smith based his religious thinking on a book of Scripture (the Book of Mormon) which traced a connection between the Native Americans and the lost tribes of Israel. Smith gathered a following and moved from New York to Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. In Illinois, the Mormon founder was murdered by a local mob. To escape persecution, the Mormons under the leadership of Brigham Young migrated to the western frontier, where they established the New Zion (as they called their religious community) on the banks of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Their cooperative social organization helped the Mormons to prosper in the wilderness. Their practice of polygamy irritated the U.S. government.
CULTURE: IDEAS, THE ARTS, AND LITERATURE

In Europe, during the early years of the 19th century, a romantic movement in art and literature stressed intuition and feelings, individual acts of heroism, and the study of nature. At the same time, in the U.S. from 1820 to 1860, these romantic and idealistic themes were best expressed by the transcendentalists, a small group of New England writers and reformers.

**THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS**

Writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson & Henry David Thoreau questioned the doctrines of established churches and the capitalistic habits of the merchant class. They argued for a mystical way of thinking as a means for discovering one’s inner self and looking for the essence of God in nature. Their views challenged the materialism of American society by suggesting that artistic expression was more important than the pursuit of wealth. Although the transcendentalist were highly individualistic and viewed organized institutions as unimportant, they supported a variety of reforms, especially the antislavery movement.

1. **Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882):**

   The best-known transcendentalist, he was among the most popular American lecturers of the 19th century. He evoked the nationalistic spirit of Americans by urging them not to imitate European culture but to create an entirely original American culture. His essays & poems argued for self-reliance, independent thinking, & spiritual matters over material ones. As a northerner, he became a leading critic of slavery in the 1850s & then an ardent supporter of the Union during the Civil War.

2. **Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862):**

   Living in the same town as Emerson (Concord, Mass.) was one of his close friends, Henry David Thoreau. To test his transcendentalist philosophy, Thoreau conducted a two-year experiment of living by himself in the woods outside town. There he used observations of nature to discover essential truths about life and the universe. His writings from these years were published in the book for which he is best known, (Walden). Because of this book, Thoreau is remembered today as a pioneer ecologist & conservationist. Through his essay "On Civil Disobedience," Thoreau established himself as an early advocate of nonviolent protest. The essay presented Thoreau's argument for not obeying unjust laws. The philosopher's own act of civil disobedience was to refuse to pay a tax that might be used in an "immoral" war-the U.S. war with Mexico in 1846. For breaking the tax law, Thoreau was forced to spend one night in the Concord jail. In the next century, Thoreau's essay and actions would inspire the nonviolent movements of both Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States.

3. **Brook Farm**

   Could a community of people live out the transcendentalist ideal? In 1841, George Ripley, a Protestant minister, launched a communal experiment at Brook Farm in Massachusetts. His goal was to achieve "a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor." Living at Brook Farm at different times were some of the leading intellectuals of the period. Emerson went as did Margaret Fuller, a feminist (advocate of women's rights) & Nathaniel Hawthorne, the novelist. A bad fire & heavy debts forced the end of the experiment in 1849. But Brook Farm was remembered for its atmosphere of artistic creativity and an innovative school that attracted the sons & daughters of New England's intellectual elite.

**Communal Experiments**

The idea of withdrawing from society to create an ideal community, or utopia, was not a new idea. But never before were the social experiments so numerous as during the mid-1800s. The open lands of the U.S. before the Civil War proved fertile ground for over a 100 experimental communities. The early Mormons may be considered an example of a religious communal effort & Brook Farm an example of a secular experiment. Although many communities were short-lived, these utopias reflect the diversity of the reform ideas of the time.

1. **Shakers:**

   One religious communal movement, the Shakers had about 6000 members in various communities by the 1840s. Shakers held property in common & kept women & men strictly separate forbidding even marriage. For lack of new recruits, the Shaker communities virtually died out by the mid-1900s. Settlements founded in Iowa by Germans allowed for marriage, which helped to ensure the survival of their communities.

2. **New Harmony:**

   The secular (nonreligious) experiment in New Harmony, Indians, was the work of the industrialist & reformer Robert Owen. He hoped his utopian socialist community would provide an answer to the problems of inequity and alienation caused by the Industrial Revolution. The experiment failed as a result of financial problems & disagreements among community members.

3. **Oneida Community:**

   John Noyes in 1848 started a cooperative community in Oneida, New York, that became highly controversial. Dedicated to an ideal of perfect social & economic equality, members of the community shared property & marriage partners. Critics attacked this experiment of “free love” despite the community prospering economically by producing excellent silverware.

4. **Fourier Phalanxes:**

   In the 1840s, some Americans, including the editor Horace Greeley, became interested in the theories of the French socialist Charles Fourier. To solve problems of a competitive society, Fourier advocated that people share work & living arrangements in communities known as Fourier Phalanxes. This movement died out, almost as quickly as it appeared, as Americans proved too individualistic to adapt to communal living.
*Arts & Literature*

The democratic & reforming impulses of the Age of Jackson expressed themselves in painting, architecture, and literature

1. **Painting:**
   Genre painting-portraying the everyday life of ordinary people became the vogue of artists in the 1830s. George Bingham depicted the common people in various settings like riding riverboats, voting on election day, & carrying out chores. William Mount won fame for his rural compositions. Both Thomas Cole and Frederick Church emphasized the heroic beauty of American landscapes, especially in scenes along the Hudson River in New York & the western frontier wilderness. The Hudson River School expressed the romantic age’s fascination with the natural world.

2. **Architecture:**
   Reflecting upon the democracy of ancient Athens, American architects adapted classical Greek styles during the Jacksonian era to glorify the democratic spirit of the republic. Columned facades like those of ancient Greek temples graced the entryways to public buildings, banks, hotels, and even some private homes.

3. **Literature:**
   In addition to the transcendentalist authors (notably Emerson & Thoreau), other writers helped to create a literature that was distinctively American. Partly as a result of the War of 1812, the American people became more nationalistic and eager to read the works of American writers about American themes. Washington Irving and James Cooper, for example, wrote fiction using American settings. Cooper's "Leatherstocking Tales" were a series of novels that include the "The Last of the Mohicans," "The Pathfinder," & "The Deerslayer," which glorified the frontiersman as nature's nobleman. "The Scarlet Letter" & other novels by Nathaniel Hawthorne questioned the intolerance & conformity in American life. Herman Melville's novel "Moby-Dick" reflected the cultural conflicts of the era, as it told the story of Captain Ahab's pursuit of the white whale.